

LGBT Rights are Human Rights. Period.

by James Costos, U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Spain and Principality of Andorra

The day I received a call from President Obama asking me to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Spain and Andorra was one of the proudest of my life. Not just because it is an honor to serve a president whom I truly admire, or a country that I profoundly love, but because my nomination, along with that of four other openly gay ambassadors, told the world that the United States is committed to advocating for full equality for the LGBT community.

This administration has made it clear that, in the words of former Secretary of State Clinton, “LGBT rights are human rights, period.” In 2014, the 10th anniversary of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia happened to fall in the same year as the 60th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the legendary court case that ruled that separate is not equal; the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, landmark civil rights legislation; and the 45th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, which led to the establishment of the gay rights movement. This convergence is powerful and profound. Although we are a different nation than we were 50 or 60 years ago, we have much to learn in looking back at the struggles and perseverance that characterised our civil rights movement. Indeed, President Obama has drawn a parallel between our society’s historic battle against race and gender discrimination and the current movement for marriage equality in the United States.

Yes, this is a focus of domestic politics in the United States, but even as we work toward ensuring that the rights of all Americans are respected at home, we endeavour to integrate the same commitment to our work abroad. Advocating for the human rights of the LGBT community around the world is now an integral part of American foreign policy, and an issue where we are an ally to partners who would do the same. And to do so effectively, to quote Vice President Biden, we must lead “not merely by the example of our power, but by the power of our example.” That’s why the President, the Vice President, and Secretary of State Kerry have not just become leading voices in support for LGBT rights; they have committed resources and are driving policy to tangibly empower LGBT individuals. In 2011, President Obama directed all Federal agencies working abroad to ensure that U.S. diplomatic and foreign-assistance efforts protect and promote the human rights of LGBT persons. This has meant everything from increased benefits for LGBT government employees and their partners, including full diplomatic privileges for same-sex partners, to new programs to protect refugees and asylum seekers, to the launch of the Global Equity Fund, a coalition of 13 like-minded governments, corporations, and foundations that has provided more than \$7.8 million in over 50 countries to support groups that work to protect LGBT rights. While to some people this may look like something new, it’s really just a continuation of a long American tradition of fighting for freedom for all.

While we have seen a lot of progress in recent years, we have work ahead of us. In the first-ever UN General Assembly event to advance the human rights of LGBT individuals, Secretary Kerry noted that “In too many places around the world, LGBT persons are still punished for simply exercising their fundamental rights and freedoms.” This is a tragic truth: about 80 countries worldwide criminalize homosexuality, and five countries define it as a crime punishable by

death. In many others, LGBT persons remain vulnerable to arbitrary arrest, harassment, discrimination, and violence.

Yet there are countries that serve as beacons for the rest. Yet there are countries that serve as beacons for the rest. Spain is one of them, having been at the vanguard, for example, of legalizing same sex marriage, allowing homosexual couples to adopt children, and support for transgendered people. But serving as an example often means that it is even more important to continue to ask what more could be done. That's why we form alliances not just with governments, but also with ordinary people. Since my arrival, I have met with many members of the Spanish LGBT community who have shared their concerns, for example, with bullying in schools, hate crimes, and inequality in the workplace. I am proud to offer moral support to their advocacy efforts, use my good offices to help spotlight their issues, and connect them to the global advocacy work being done by groups such as the Human Rights Campaign. Although in many ways the United States has much to learn from Spain's example, there is strength to be drawn in exchanging experiences and working hand in hand to promote our shared values elsewhere around the world. As President Obama said, "We believe in human dignity – that every person is created equal, no matter who you are, or what you look like, or who you love, or where you come from."